

FRIENDS

WHO CROSSED THE LINES

A Football Field – Marked With Lines

Football is a game of crossing lines. Cross the line of scrimmage before the hike and a referee's flag will fly with an offside penalty.

If you leap to make a catch, but land over the sideline, your reception doesn't count. If you move the ball 10-yards beyond the line where your team started, you get four more downs to play.



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A Town – Marked With Lines

Like many other towns in America, Gary, Indiana also had lines. Decades ago, many of those boundaries were invisible – while others were clearly marked with signs. Carl Biesecker and George Taliaferro grew up only a few miles apart in that town. But they were separated by a boundary between White and African-American neighborhoods.

Those two football players first met in a 1944 game between all-White Horace Mann High and all-Black Roosevelt High.

Carl Crosses a Line

At the conclusion of that game, Carl Biesecker crossed over to the opposing team's sideline, extended his hand to team captain George Taliaferro, introduced himself and said, "It was a pleasure to play football against you."

They didn't have much time to build a friendship in the months that followed, because like many others they went into the military after graduating high school.

World War II soon ended and they were discharged from service. Both enrolled at Indiana University and joined the football team. This time, they were playing on the same side.

Taliaferro Breaks Records

Taliaferro gained national recognition there as an All-American three times, leading the team to an undefeated Big Ten Conference Championship. His performance as a halfback, quarterback



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and punter would eventually get him elected to the College Football Hall of Fame. (This was two years before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in major league baseball.)

After college, Taliaferro became the first African-American player to be drafted by an NFC team when he was picked by the Chicago Bears in 1949. Instead, he chose to honor a contract with the Los Angeles Dons where he was named Rookie of the Year by the AFC.

After he moved to the New York Yanks, that team moved the following year to become the Dallas Texans. Next year, his team moved once again to become the Baltimore Colts. With the same team under three names in three cities, Taliaferro was picked for the Pro Bowl three years in a row. After 6 years in pro-football, Taliaferro retired from the game in 1955.



Friends Cross the Lines Again

Taliaferro and Biesecker reconnected back at Indiana University where both returned to pursue post-graduate studies.

One evening, they decided to go to a movie and break a Jim Crow segregation law. Taliaferro explained, “I had made up my mind I was not going to obey segregation signs.” So, after Biesecker took a seat on the floor level, Taliaferro took out a screwdriver and removed the “Colored” sign at the balcony steps before joining his friend. Taliaferro kept that sign and proudly shows it off to this day.

Separated by Jobs and Geography

After Carl Biesecker completed his post-grad work, he moved to take a job with the Arizona Department of Education where he worked for 30 years, raising four children with his wife Lucy.

George Taliaferro went on to complete his Master’s at Howard University, eventually serving as Dean of Students at Morgan State University before returning to Indiana University to serve as a special assistant to the president.



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Carl Needs His Old Friend

Decades later, Carl Biesecker was struggling to take care of his wife Lucy in her final year with Alzheimer’s. On a particularly hard day, he told their daughter Angie he really wanted to talk with George. She located Taliaferro and called him. He told her, “Your father was my friend when it wasn’t politically correct to be my friend.” That began a series of weekly phone conversations between Carl and George.

Biesecker’s wife Lucy died in 2013. He then suffered a stroke last year. While in recovery, he told another daughter Madeline, “We’ve got to call George. I’ve got to hear his voice.”

Biesecker is now an 87-year-old resident at Brookdale Freedom Plaza in Peoria, Arizona. When the Brookdale staff learned of his desire to see his old friend George, they made arrangements with the Wish of a Lifetime organization to bring Taliaferro and his wife to Arizona.

When Carl’s daughter Angie surprised him on Christmas with news that George would be coming for a visit a week before the Super Bowl, she recounted that he got “pretty choked up, and was holding back tears.”

“When I think about growing up in Gary, Indiana – it was impossible for Carl and I to be friends. But it happened.”



NBC reporter Josh Elliott with Carl Biesecker.

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A Football Friends Reunion – The 1,000th Wish of a Lifetime

When George Taliaferro walked into the great room at Brookdale Freedom Plaza, he embraced his friend he had not seen in 64 years. “You really look good. I’m serious,” George said.

Carl deflected, “Well...I had a stroke...my left arm.” The old halfback George responded, “So, all I have to do now is run around your left side, and you can’t do anything.” After laughter and back-slapping, Taliaferro took a serious note, “You have been a mainstay in my life, for the manner in which you encompassed me as a human being.”

Their reunion was covered by NBC reporter Josh Elliott with a camera crew from the TODAY show. It marked the 1,000th wish granted by Wish of a Lifetime. More than 600 of those wishes have been fulfilled for Brookdale residents.

Returning a Favor

At 88 years of age, Taliaferro reflected, “When I think about growing up in Gary, Indiana – it was impossible for Carl and I to be friends. But it happened.”

In 1944, Carl Biesecker crossed a line when he crossed a football field to shake hands with George Taliaferro. In the years that followed, Biesecker crossed even more lines and Taliaferro stepped outside more boundaries, breaking records in the process.

Now, 70 years after that first handshake, George crossed the country to return the favor and shake the hand of a friend who greeted him as an equal.

